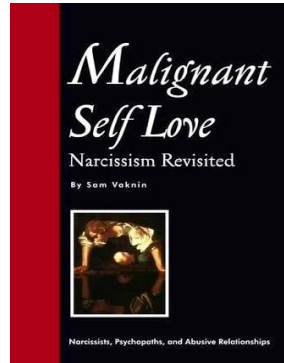


Britannica's Reference Galaxy

By: [Sam Vaknin, Ph.D.](#)



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Overview

The Encyclopedia Britannica has long been much more than a venerable print reference work. A decade ago it pioneered a freemium website (some content free, other content behind a pay wall). This has now flourished into a comprehensive walled garden of knowledge. Additionally, the Britannica publishes books and CD-ROMs about specific topics and issues. These are the best primers and introductions available to a host of fields and areas, from history to science.

Britannica Online

The Britannica's rich online content adds context and dollops of information to the already unsurpassed DVD (see below). Indeed, buyers of any of the Britannica's physical products enjoy 30-180 days of free access to this cornucopian resource (subject to registration of their products). But, in an age of mobile, wireless smartphones and netbooks, the Britannica Online is also a stand-alone product: it provides the entire content of the DVD and much, much more besides. Admittedly, at 30-50 USD annually it is not cheap and thus more suited to institutions, universities, and libraries than to individuals. The Britannica would do well to consider an affordable, more limited consumer version.

Research tools include: an A to Z browser of the entire encyclopedia content; world atlas; world data analyst (statistics by country, replete with analytical and graphing tools); timelines on a multitude of subjects, from sports to evolution; browseable content of more than 500 magazines (otherwise not available online for free); and an "on this day" feature which aggregates date-sensitive content from the entire corpus of information. A selection of new and revised full-text articles is highlighted. In total, the Britannica Online comprises more than 1 million pages. There is a delightful, colourful, and multimedia-rich Britannica Online for Kids.

The paid content is augmented by loads of free features. "Spotlights" provide multimedia-enhanced tours of broad subjects (guide to Shakespeare; Normandy 1944; 300 women who changed the world, and so on); newsletters provide a plethora of theme-specific information; widgets and RSS feeds allow the user to explore places, people, and topics; aggregated newsfeeds from the BBC News and the New-York Times sit right atop a Merriam-Webster dictionary searchbox.

I tested the site on 4 mobile phones (older versions SonyEricsson and Nokia, iPhone 3, and Siemens) and it worked well as far as text is concerned. Graphics and videos were another matter, but this is a problem common to all websites: from YouTube to the CNN. Britannica has great topic-specific apps for the iPhone as well as a "Concise Britannica" app. But, I couldn't find a CNN-like app or widget to allow me to surf the Britannica Online and fully benefit from its visual content. I could also find no Britannica apps for Android-based smartphones and devices: a major lacuna.

Encyclopedia Britannica 2011 Ultimate Edition

The Encyclopedia Britannica 2011 Ultimate Edition (formerly "Student and Home Edition") builds on the success of its completely revamped previous editions in 2006-10. The rate of innovation in the last five versions was impressive and welcome. It continues apace in this rendition with Britannica Biographies (Great Minds, Heroes and Villains, and Leaders), Classical Music (500 audio files arranged by composer), and a great Workspace for Project Management (a kind of friendly digital den). Six months of free access to the myriad riches

of the Britannica Online complete the package (as well as monthly updates and discounts on a plethora of products).

The Britannica comes bundled with an atlas (close to 1800 maps linked to articles and 287 World Data Profiles of individual countries and territories); the Merriam-Webster Dictionary and Thesaurus, augmented by a Spanish-English translation dictionary; classic articles from previous editions; thirteen yearbooks (12,200 articles in total); Interactive Timelines with 4000+ indexed timeline entries; a Research Organizer; and a Knowledge Navigator (called The Brain or BrainStormer). All told, it offers a directory of more than 166,000 reviewed and vetted links to online content.

In its new form the Britannica is user-friendly, with an A to Z Quick Search feature. The Britannica's newest interface is even more intuitive and uncluttered than previously and is great fun to use. It offers morsels of knowledge, some of it date-specific, appetizingly presented through a ticker tape of visuals that leisurely scrolls across the bottom of the screen plus highly edifying interactive tours of articles and attendant media.

When you enter even the first few letters of a term in the search box, it offers various options and is persistent: no need to click on the toolbar's "search" button every time you want to find something in this vast storehouse of knowledge. Moreover, the user can save search results onto handy "Virtual Notecards". Whole articles can be copied onto the seemingly inexhaustible Workspace.

The new Britannica's display is tab-based, avoiding the erstwhile confusing proliferation of windows with every move. Most importantly, articles appear in full, not in sections. This major improvement facilitates the finding of relevant keywords in and the printing of entire texts. These are only a few of the numerous alterations and enhancements.

Perhaps the most refreshing change is the Britannica's Update Center. Dozens of monthly updates and new, timely articles are made available online (subject to free registration). A special button alerts the user when an entry in the base product has been updated.

Regrettably, the updates are not incorporated into the vast encyclopedia and its search interface: they are out there on a website. Moreover, the product does not alert its user to the existence of completely new articles, only to updated ones. It takes a manual scan of the monthly lists to reveal newly added content.

Speaking of updates, one must not forget to dwell on the Britannica's unequalled yearbooks. Each annual volume contains the year in events, scientific developments, and everything you wanted to know about the latest in any and every conceivable field of human endeavor, or Nature. About 12,200 articles culled from the last 13 editions buttress and update the Encyclopedia's anyhow impressive offerings.

The Britannica provides considerably more text than any other extant traditional encyclopedia, print or digital (a total of 62 million words). But it has noticeably enhanced its non-textual content over the years (the 1994-7 editions had nothing or very little but words, words, and more words): it now boasts in excess of 30,000 images and illustrations (depending on the version) and 900 video and audio clips. This is not to mention the Britannica Classics: articles from Britannica's most famous contributors: from Sigmund Freud and Albert Einstein to Harry Houdini and from Marie Curie to Orville Wright.

The Britannica fully supports serious research. It is a sober assemblage of first-rate essays, up to date bibliographies, and relevant multimedia. It constitutes a desktop university library: thorough, well-researched, comprehensive, trustworthy.

The Britannica's 84-107,000 articles (depending on the version) are long and thorough, supported by impressive bibliographies, and written by the best scholars in their respective fields. The company's Editorial Board of Advisors reads like the who's who of the global intellectual and scientific community.

The Britannica is an embarrassment of riches. Users often find the wealth and breadth of information daunting and data mining is fast becoming an art form. This is why the Britannica incorporated the "Personal Brain" to cope with this predicament. But an informal poll I conducted online shows that few know how to deploy it effectively.

The Britannica also sports Student and Elementary versions of its venerable flagship product, replete with a Homework Helpdesk, "how to" documents, and interactive games, activities, and math and science tutorials. Still, the Britannica is far better geared to tackle the information needs of adults and, even more so, professionals. It provides unequalled coverage of its topics.

Ironically, this is precisely why the market positioning of the Britannica's Elementary and Student Encyclopedias is problematic: compared to the Wikipedia, the Britannica's brand is distinctly adult and scholarly. The vacuum left by the Encarta (lamented) discontinuance, though, should make it easier to market the Student and Elementary versions (which are an integral part of the Ultimate Edition and not sold separately).

Still, the 2011 editions of both the Student and Elementary encyclopedias improve on the past in terms of both coverage and facilities: the **Homework Helpdesk** is a collection of useful homework resources including a video subject browse; online learning games and activities; online subject spotlights; and how-to documents on topics such as writing a book review. There are also **Learning Games and Activities**: hundreds of fun and interactive games and activities to help students with subjects like Math, Science, and Social Studies. Both versions are updated monthly with new online-only articles.

The current edition is fully integrated with the Internet. Apart from articles about new topics and personalities in the news, it offers additional and timely content and revisions on a dedicated Web site. The digital product includes a staggering number of links (165,808!) to third party content and articles on the Web. The GeoAnalyzer, which compares national statistical data and generates charts and graphs, is now Web-based and greatly enhanced.

The Britannica would do well to offer a browser add-on search bar and to integrate with desktop search tools from Google, Microsoft, Yahoo, and others. Currently it offers search results through Google but this requires the user to install add-ons or plug-ins and to go through a convoluted rite of passage. A seamless experience is in the cards. Users must and will be able to ferret content from all over - their desktop, their encyclopedias, and the Web - using a single, intuitive interface.

Some minor gripes:

The atlas, dictionary, and thesaurus incorporated in the Britannica are still surprisingly outdated. Why not use a more current - and dynamically updated - offering? What about dictionaries for specialty terms (medical or computer glossaries, for instance)?

Despite considerable improvement over the previous edition, the Britannica still consumes (not to say hogs) computer resource far in excess of the official specifications. This makes it less suitable for installation on older PCs and on netbooks. If you own a machine with anything earlier than Pentium 4, less than 1 Gb RAM, and less than 10 Gb of really free space, the Britannica would be clunky at best.

But that's it. Don't think twice. Run to the closest retail outlet (or surf to the Britannica's [Web site](#)) and purchase the 2010 edition now. It offers excellent value for money (less than \$40, with a rebate). For less than the price of an antivirus software and for a fraction of the cost of Windows 7, you will significantly enhance your access to the sum total of human knowledge and wisdom.

With the demise of Microsoft's [Encarta](#) (it has been discontinued) and the tribulations of the [Wikipedia](#) (its rules have been revamped to resemble a traditional encyclopedia, alienating its contributors in the process), the Encyclopedia Britannica 2010 (established in 1768) may have won the battle of reference.

Britannica Guides and CD-ROMs

Britannica guides come in two forms: books and CD-ROMs. By now, the range of titles and issues tackled is staggering: from climate change to Renaissance artists. I have written extensively and have read widely on many of the topics, but have yet to find more balanced and roundly-informed offerings than The Britannica's. A typical print guide sports 400+ pages, densely packed with state-of-the-art data and research, the Britannica team having covered every conceivable aspect, bringing to the fore the most current knowledge; the most recent studies; the most erudite interlocutors; and the hardest of facts.

Take, as an example, the Britannica Guide to Climate Change, a typical product: it starts with an edifying vade mecum: an introduction by the eminent scientist, Robert M. May. While clearly on the side of environmentalists, he is no starry-eyed tree hugger but a hard-nosed scientist, worried sick about our abuse of our only planet, Earth. This is followed by concise but comprehensive chapters dedicated to climate, climate change, and weather forecasting; the changing planet (land, hydrosphere, atmosphere, and the decline in biodiversity); and an overview of ideas and arguments about the environment, replete with a synoptic sweep of history and prominent thinkers. Finally, the book charts our (relative) progress and what more needs to be done, including an overview of all available alternative energy technologies. The book is refreshing in its objectivity and candor. It refrains from taking sides or from preaching. This does not mean that it is a soulless inventory of data: on the contrary, it is yet another passionate plea to save our planet and our future. But it addresses our brains rather than our hearts and this makes for a welcome departure from contemporary practices.

The CD-ROMs are actually compilations of topic-specific content – both text and visuals – from the Encyclopedia Britannica. The Encyclopedia is sprawling and, despite its exhaustive internal hyperlinks, the chances of missing out on relevant content are high and the effort required in tracking down all the branches of its tree of knowledge is considerable. Britannica's CD-ROMs come to the rescue. Consider, for example, the “Discovering

Dinosaurs and Other Prehistoric Life” disc: it aggregates hundreds of articles about dinosaurs, ancient plants, ancient marine life, ancient amphibians, reptiles, and birds, ancient mammals, fossils, paleontology, geologic time, and pertinent biographies. The disc contains hundreds of videos, animations, and images as well as homework tools and research organizers. The CD-ROM constitutes an ideal – and guided - tour of the treasure trove that is the Encyclopedia Britannica. It is easy to install and comes with a 30-day free trial of the Britannica Online.

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